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The Flower of Methodism

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The Blue Flower of Methodism



BY

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The Blue Flower of Methodism

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HE BLUE FLOWER is the title of a recent holiday story-book. As a work of art, the story has all the beauty and precision of tone of a sensitively tuned harp. It is the story of a search for peace—the search of a restless soul, who sees in visions of the day the Blue Flower over the sea, in the mirage of the desert, in the nook of the vanishing foothills, and whose life is given to the search—the search—the unsatisfied search for the sacred thing. In his wanderings he comes to the beautiful city of Peace. But yesterday it had been called the city

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Ablis, the Forsaken. And when the traveler begged to know why it had once been called the city Forsaken and now the city of Peace, it was told him how the city had once been beautiful and sweet with gardens of flowers and happy voices in them; but because of evil things the fountains which fed the canals that watered the gardens and filled the cisterns of the houses had been choked up and turned aside, and the fair city had become forsaken and desolate and filled with misery. And it was told the traveler that when the Source seemed lost, and men were filled with despair as they hewed out cisterns for themselves in vain, one day one came whose heart was moved with compassion, and who said that they must find again the Source and open again the fountain of the living stream. If they would do this and visit the Source continually and offer prayers and praise beside it, the water would

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run down plentifully and the gardens would blossom and the city rejoice. And he went forth to open the fountain. A few followed him. As he journeyed up the mountain-side the people fell away. At last he was alone. Later, the people pressed up the path where they heard the tinkling and the joy of falling water, and there at the Source they saw their savior, and the stream flowing from the little chapel in the rugged mountain-side; but by the fountain in the little chapel he who had opened the fountain lay dead. It was said that he had been killed by those whose business it was to dig other wells.

The waters flowed down the mountain into the city. The canals filled; the gardens burst into blossom; the air was vocal with happy songs; the households were lit with contentment; mothers stroked the heads of their children; there was no discord; there was plentiful life. And the name of the city

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was no longer Forsaken, but its name was Peace.

A little child led the traveler up the mountain-side to the Source. The path was aromatic with flowers; it was smooth and plain because it was trod by many every day. And as they prayed and sang in the little grotto or chapel at the Source, the waters rose in the fountain and the canals filled and prosperity sang its way along their courses through street and garden.

The traveler noted, as he came down the path, that some did not go to the Source. They never went there. They denied that there was any reason why *they* should take the time to go up to the Source to pray. Their own cisterns were near the stream that came down the mountain-side, and they noted that their cisterns had water in them for that reason, whether they went up the well-known path or no. Some were too

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busy to go. They were building markets and palaces and shops. Others, the traveler noted, ridiculed the Source. They said their cisterns, independent of the Source, would fill whether there was any Source or not. Others would have nothing to do with the Source in any wise, and built for themselves wells, distant, where the waters of the fountain could not penetrate, or only a few drops with difficulty. And such men, the traveler noted, were not beautiful in their voices nor in their faces, reflecting their hearts. But the mothers still took their children by the hand and led them up the path to the Source, and taught them to pray and to be thankful for what the fountain gave forth.

And the traveler went his way.

And when the years had passed, he came again to the city. And behold! It was like what it had been in the ancient time. It was Forsaken. The gardens bloomed not. The

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fields were bare. The life was gone. Joy had fled. And though the people ran hither and thither for satisfaction, from cistern to cistern, and from report to report, they found but emptiness and drouth and want.

Why? The traveler sought again the door where he had found a home in the former time. All were gone. And yet not all. The little child whose parent had led her to the Source was there, a woman now, young and beautiful. And the traveler asked with sorrowful surprise why the city was desolate. And the maiden told him all. All? Yes; it was all in this: *men no more went to the Source*. They had now many other cisterns, but they had little water; many other pools, but in them were no living streams. And some worshiped the windlasses of the new wells, and some came crying, "Water to sell!" The path up the mountain-side was overgrown with weeds,

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and it was remembered, if at all, only as a fable. The city had outgrown fables. It had evolved beyond fables. They had forgotten.

But a little water came down the channel from the mountain-side each day, and its influence was felt; men gathered it and drank it, though they ridiculed its Source. "I still go up to pray," the maiden said. "And lo, it is now the hour of prayer; let us walk once more as of old the path together." And the two went up the path together. And the traveler lingered without as the maiden went in to pray. But as she prayed he heard again the tinkling and music of falling waters, and when he looked in, he saw the waters in the fountain rising to meet the maiden's face, and he saw that the whole place was filled with a halo of light that came forth from her as she prayed. Hence the waters were in the old canals and

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basins somewhat—because she still prayed, and thus one person kept the fountain flowing and brought life to those who were unconscious or unbelieving. Yes, there was some water. And there would continue to be while the maiden lived, for she would remember always. And there at the Source the Blue Flower bloomed for her.

* * * * *

O, slow of heart, and faithless and unbelieving, will we not see in this story here condensed into a poorly drawn paragraph, the living picture, the living allegory, the living secret of the Methodist Episcopal Church? Have we not ourselves had, as an historic Church, one well-known Source? From this Source has there not flowed down the stream of life, filling our mouths with praise and with prosperity? Has not this stream made us a blessing to mankind?

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And has it not been the path to where our Blue Flower is? Has not that path been beaten smooth and plain by the feet of the fathers? Have we not a testimony? Are we not a "raised-up" people—"raised up" and "sent" into the world to proclaim what our Blue Flower and the path to the Source are?

Even so!

The Blue Flower of Methodism is our emphasis that it is possible for man to be at peace with God—to know that he is a child of God and a joint heir with Jesus Christ. That doctrine is the foot-path to peace, and its experience is the Blue Flower of peace at the end of the path. The Blue Flower of Methodism is the realization and the proclamation of the witness of the Spirit bearing witness with our Spirit of forgiveness and oneness with God through Jesus Christ, our Lord, our Savior, our Compan-

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ion, and our Friend. "I am with you alway," "I have called you friends."

It is that Blue Flower which Wesley found when, like the traveler of the tale, he too had wandered across seas, had slept on the ground, had walked barefoot among savages in the rough paths of a far, strange land—of whom Whitefield wrote on his arrival in Georgia after Wesley had returned to England: "The work Mr. Wesley has done in America is inexpressible. His name is very precious among the people, and he has laid a fountain that I hope neither man nor devil will ever be able to shake. O that I may follow him as he followed Christ!"—who had visited the poor, the sick, the imprisoned, who had fasted twice each week, omitting no item of self-denial which could be thought lawful—and who, by reason of these things, had been held up to ridicule,

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his sole aim being to achieve the will of God—but who had set it down in his journal, as he returned to England, “I went to America to convert the Indians, but O! who shall convert me?” and two years later, in the midst of a life of self-sacrifice to the will of God, had written practically the same language—such was his quest for the Blue Flower of peace.

It was the morning of the 24th of May, 1738—the morning of the day he was to find his Blue Flower. He arose at five and opened his Testament and read: “There are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises, that by these ye may be partakers of the Divine nature.” Later he opened and read: “Thou art not far from the kingdom of God.” O man, thou who readest these words, does not your own heart warm with expectancy, as you watch this lonely seeker

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climbing on, on, on, evermore searching and longing for the prize, and now assured, seemingly, by God's Word, that he is presently to clasp the Blue Flower in his heart? During the afternoon of that day he attended St. Paul's Cathedral; the anthem comforted him. At night he went wearily because "reluctantly" to Aldersgate Street. Now the climax. Now the Flower. He heard one, as he entered, reading Luther's preface to the Romans; but at eight o'clock and forty-five minutes, while the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ was being described, "I felt," he says, "my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ—Christ alone—for salvation; and an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the loss of sin and death; and then I testified openly to all there what I now felt in my heart."

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And thus John Wesley found his Blue Flower. Glory be to God!

* * * *

More than six years after that blessed night Wesley spoke of another experience of “what it was to be still before God.” He says that he “waked the next morning by the grace of God in the same spirit; and about eight, being with two or three that believed in Jesus, I felt such an awe and tender sense of the presence of God as greatly confirmed me therein; so that God was before me all the day long. I sought and found him in every place, and could truly say, when I lay down at night, ‘Now I have lived to-day.’ ”

* * * * *

The witness of the Spirit—that is to say, the reality and the priceless superiority of the life hidden with Christ—is the deposit, the Blue Flower of Methodism.

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And if we should ask, "Where is the Source, where the fountain of our spiritual life, the one cause up the mountain-side from which flows down the living stream, by which Methodism has been the historic blessing which Almighty God has made it to mankind?" we should answer that that Source is the death of Christ. We have followed him out of the city, as he went forth compassionate to open again the fountains of life for mankind; we know that the few left him, and that at the last he was as a shepherd, with the sheep scattered abroad, alone, all alone, and how alone! But we heard the falling waters of life, and when we pushed far enough up the mountain, even the mount of Calvary, we found Christ there at the fountain he had opened, dead both by and for the sin of the world. And the Methodist Church has been a Church of singing, a Church of emotion, a Church of

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witnessing, because it has gone continually to the Source, to the place where was opened the fountain filled with blood, drawn from Immanuel's veins; where sinners plunged beneath that flood lose all their guilty stains. The Source of power and the Source of life to Methodism has been her testimony to the spot where men might find and know Jesus Christ as a personal and complete Savior—to the saved and the sanctified life!

Well might Dr. William Hunter sing:

"There is a spot to me more dear
Than native vale or mountain;
A spot for which affection's tear
Springs grateful from its fountain;
'T is not where kindred souls abound,
Though that were almost heaven;
But where I first my Savior found,
And felt my sins forgiven.

O sacred hour, O hallowed spot,
Where love Divine first found me!
Wherever falls my distant lot,
My heart will linger round thee;

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And when from earth I rise to soar
Up to my home in heaven,
Down will I cast my eyes once more,
Where I was first forgiven."

For at that spot, that Source, he had found his Blue Flower.

* * * * *

The historic power of Methodism, therefore, has been her testimony to the fact that God may be known as a pardoning and complete Savior. Her Blue Flower has been her personal experience of the witness of the Spirit. As Methodism has gone, keeping the path well worn, to the Source, which is the death of Christ and its cleansing power, she has been mighty; she has been fruitful; she has been the city of Peace to millions.

She has been blessed with seeing the multitudes turned from their broken and empty cisterns, their hatred, their guilt, their de-

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spair ; she has been able to lead them to the Source, and to see them become new creatures in Christ Jesus, their own lives in turn watered by the living waters that flow from the cleft rock ; she has seen the family altar succeed the dominion of rum, quietness succeed turmoil, joy succeed despair, fraternity and good will succeed feuds and envy, and progress and holy ambitions succeed low ideals and low satisfactions. The mission of Methodism has been to preach a great, a conscious salvation. For this purpose, Mr. Wesley taught, Methodism was raised up of God, and in her hands, there at the Source where Jesus died, was placed the Blue Flower of her blessed conscious experience.

* * * * *

Why should it be considered a strange thing that God should be known ? God is great. God is greater than all his works. The heaven of heavens can not contain God.

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When, therefore, we consider the extent of the heavens, the systems and galaxies of heavenly bodies like the sands of the sea for numbers and of size compared with which this vast globe is but as a cipher brought against infinity, it is not wonderful that it should be taught that the Author of an utterly incomprehensible universe must himself be incomprehensible to such as ourselves; and that, when we begin to think, about all that religion can offer is a vague respect for an unknowable *x*, “a last relic of the fear, and a certain attraction towards the ideal, which is a relic of the love, that characterized the earlier periods of religious growth;” in other words, that religion, as Professor Ribot puts it, that religion should “turn into religious philosophy”—which are as different as white and black.

But, one moment, please. This proceeds upon the theory not only of the greatness of

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God, but of the insignificance of man. But is man insignificant? However walled in his demonstrated powers may be, is he insignificant potentially? "It doth not appear what we shall be." Is man so insignificant that he can not apprehend God? Is he so insignificant that God can not make him know that he is near, that he is good, that his name and his attitude are Love, if God really wants to do it? Passing by the works that man has wrought, the arts, the books, the civilizations, the governments, man has shown since the morning of the world, contemplate for one moment the felt need of man for God, his cries for God, his despair for God, the hunger and solitude and desolation of his soul for God, and his set teeth when he has gone over the brink of the cataract of death into What—beyond! Is it not reasonable to suppose, to expect, to demand, that a God wise and powerful enough

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to construct and hang together the universe—an omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent God—could reveal himself in some way to man? Is it possible that one who could feel and write the “Œdipus” or “Prometheus” or think the thoughts of Plato, either long ago or now, could not be made even to know that God is near, if God really set himself with intent that it should be so? We do not say that such could comprehend God; but might they not apprehend him? The little child may not comprehend the father, but it may apprehend that the father is good, even if he be not wise. If God has the heart of a father, if his nature is love, and if he is not a prisoner in some bastile he has himself cast up in a universe more powerful than himself, it is to be expected, demanded, implied that the broken hands which in darkness and

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despair reach towards him will find a touch, a feeling in return.

Thus alone can the soul of man find its Blue Flower, for the soul is too great, too vast in its powers and its questions ever to find that rest the traveler in the tale was seeking until it finds it in God. Its reach, as Browning would say, is so much greater than its grasp. The greatest, plainest fact in the universe should be that man may know God. To preach and experience this is the Blue Flower of the Methodist Episcopal Church.

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We are not saying that men must find this Blue Flower in this way or that way; we are far from saying who have or who have not felt the Presence near. It is entirely congenial to us to believe that "other sheep" who are not of our own fold, stretch that

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fold theologically howsoever far we may, have heard a voice which in reality was the Shepherd's voice, and have felt him in their hearts. Why should it not be so? The apostle said on Mars' Hill, we are all "the offspring of God;" "in him we live and move and have our being;" "he is not far from every one of us;" God "hath made of one blood all nations of men, . . . and hath determined . . . that they should seek after him, if haply they might feel after him and find him, . . . in whom we live and move and have our being." There is nothing in this repugnant to the Methodist doctrines of God's universal love of humanity. Fatherhood is fundamental in our theology. Who can contemplate those watchers of the past, those great souls who pondered long on the meaning of life, and not believe that perhaps somewhat of the tranquillity which

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came to them was from the Father of us all?

Left to itself, there is, indeed, a deep pessimism in humanity. It is universal. "The early Greeks are continually held up to us in literary works as models of the healthy-minded joyousness which the religion of Nature may engender," says Professor William James in his recent Gifford lectures. "There was indeed much joyousness among the Greeks—Homer's flow of enthusiasm for most things that the sun shines upon is steady. But even in Homer the reflective passages are cheerless, and the moment the Greeks grew systematically pensive and thought of ultimates, they became unmitigated pessimists. The jealousy of the gods, the Nemesis that follows too much happiness, the all-encompassing death, fate's dark opacity, the ultimate and unintelligible

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cruelty, were the fixed background of their imagination. The beautiful joyousness of their polytheism is only a poetic modern fiction."

The history of religion itself makes it plain how pessimistic the race is until it finds God,—a pessimism which in Ecclesiastes penetrates even the sacred Canon, and is repeated in Omar Khayyam and even in certain moods of Tennyson. It all goes to make plain as noon how great was the necessity for Jesus Christ to reveal the character and accessibility of God. And it was to emphasize, if not to rediscover, the latter proposition, that Methodism was raised up and given her Divine mission.



We would go a step farther and lay stress on this point: The province of Methodism is not to boast that to her adherents alone

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these personal revelations come; her province is to emphasize the doctrine.

Let us illustrate. The theology of Jonathan Edwards and President Finney is quite different from that of Methodism. And yet President Finney relates this experience of the sweetness and nearness of our Lord Jesus Christ:

“As I turned and was about to take a seat by the fire, I received a mighty baptism of the Holy Ghost. Without any expectation of it, without ever having the thought in my mind that there was any such thing for me, without any recollection that I had ever heard the thing mentioned by any person in the world, the Holy Spirit descended upon me in a manner that seemed to go through me, body and soul. I could feel the impression, like a wave of electricity, going through and through me. Indeed, it seemed to come in waves and waves of liquid love;

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for I could not express it in any other way. It seemed like the very breath of God. I can recollect distinctly that it seemed to fan me, like immense wings.

"No words can express the wonderful love that was shed abroad in my heart. I wept aloud with joy and love; and I do not know but I should say I literally bellowed out the unutterable gushings of my heart. These waves came over me, and over me, and over me, one after the other, until I recollect I cried out, 'I shall die if these waves continue to pass over me.' I said, 'Lord, I can not bear any more;' yet I had no fear of death."

As for Jonathan Edwards, his experience of our Lord Jesus Christ was scarcely, if any, less sweet than that of Finney. We can not forbear a somewhat lengthy quotation of the realization of Christ which his intellectual and highly endowed wife had,

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and which he relates in his "Narrative of the Revival in New England." Mrs. Edwards wrote:

"Last night was the sweetest night I ever had in my life. I never before, for so long a time together, enjoyed so much of the light and rest and sweetness of heaven in my soul, but without the least agitation of body during the whole time. Part of the night I lay awake, sometimes asleep, and sometimes between sleeping and waking. But all night I continued in a constant, clear, and lively sense of the heavenly sweetness of Christ's excellent love, of his nearness to me, and of my dearness to him; with an inexpressibly sweet calmness of soul in an entire rest in him. I seemed to myself to perceive a glow of Divine love come down from the heart of Christ in heaven into my heart in a constant stream, like a stream or pencil of sweet light. At the same time my heart and soul

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all flowed out in love to Christ, so that there seemed to be a constant flowing and reflowing of heavenly love, and I appeared to myself to float or swim, in these bright, sweet beams, like the motes swimming in the beams of the sun, or the streams of his light which come in at the window. I think that what I felt each minute was worth more than all the outward comfort and pleasure which I had enjoyed in my whole life put together. It was pleasure, without the least sting, or any interruption. It was a sweetness, which my soul was lost in; it seemed to be all that my feeble frame could sustain. There was but little difference, whether I was asleep or awake; but if there was any difference, the sweetness was greatest while I was asleep. As I awoke early the next morning, it seemed to me that I had entirely done with myself. I felt that the opinions of the world concerning me were

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nothing, and that I had no more to do with any outward interest of my own than with that of a person whom I never saw. The glory of God seemed to swallow up every wish and desire of my heart."

Horace Bushnell had his realization of the Divine Presence. His biographer, Dr. T. T. Munger, no prejudiced writer certainly in favor of hysteria or abnormal religious phenomena, records this experience:

"On an early February morning Bushnell's wife awoke to hear that the light for which he had waited had come. She asked, 'What have you seen?' He replied, 'The gospel.' It came to him at last, not as something reasoned out, but as an inspiration—a revelation from the mind of God himself. . . . He regarded this experience as a personal discovery of Christ and of God as represented to him. He himself explained it: 'I seemed to pass a boundary. I had never

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been very legal in my Christian life, but now I passed from these partial seeings, glimpses, doubts, into a clearer knowledge of God and into his inspirations, which I have never wholly lost.’”

How the Holy One drew near to Henry Ward Beecher and blessed him with feelings and visions, he once wrote:

“There are times when it is not I that is talking: when I am caught up and carried away so that I know not whether I am in the body or out of the body; when I think things in the pulpit that I could never think in the study; and when I have feelings that are so different from any that belong to the lower or normal conditions that I can neither regulate them nor understand them. I see things and I hear sounds, and seem, if not in the seventh heaven, yet in a condition that leads me to apprehend what Paul said, that

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he heard things which it was not possible for a man to utter."

Further and finally for this time to illustrate what we mean, let us take an extreme step ; let us quote from the Preface to "The Oriental Christ" the experience of one who never announced himself at all as a Christian, according to our Anglo-Saxon definitions, who was and remains an Asiatic, and who to-day is a recluse in the Himalaya hills, Mozoomdar, the acute and heroic successor of Chunder Sen, in the Brahmo Somaj. After a period of longing to know Christ, he says :

"About the year 1867, a very painful period of spiritual isolation overtook me. I have repeatedly during such seasons lost the sympathy of friends, and sought my God alone. But one of the severest trials was at the time to which I make allusion. I was

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almost alone in Calcutta. My inward trials and travails had really reached a crisis. It was a week-day evening—I forgot the date now. The gloomy and haunted shades of the summer evening had suddenly thickened into darkness; and all things, both far and near, had assumed an unearthly mysteriousness. I sat near the large lake in the Hindu College compound. Above me rose in a somber mass the giant, grim old seesum tree, under the far-spreading foliage of which I have played so often, and my father played before me. A sobbing, gusty wind swam over the water's surface, the ripples sounded on the grassy bank, the breeze rustled in the highest regions of the great tree. My eyes, nearly closed, were yet dreamily conscious of the gloomy calmness of the scenery. I was meditating on the state of my soul, on the cure of all spiritual wretchedness, the brightness and peace un-

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known to me, which was the lot of God's children. I prayed and besought heaven. I cried, and shed hot tears. It might be said I was almost in a state of trance. Suddenly, it seemed to me, let me own it was revealed to me, that close to me there was a holier, more blessed, most loving personality upon which I might repose my troubled head. Jesus lay discovered in my heart as a strange, human, kindred love, as a repose, a sympathetic consolation, an unpurchased treasure to which I was freely invited. The response of my nature was unhesitating and immediate. Jesus, from that day, to me became a reality whereon I might lean. It was an impulse then, a flood of light, love, and consolation. It is no longer an impulse now. It is a faith and principle; it is an experience verified by a thousand trials."

* * * * *

Have we now made our part of our propo-

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sition plain—namely, that the province of Methodism is not to boast that to her adherents alone these personal revelations come? It is no less certain that the province of Methodism is to emphasize the doctrine of the accessibility of the Father through our Lord Jesus Christ, and that the witness of the Spirit is the heritage of God's dear children.

This is the secret of Methodism. When it has been proclaimed, God has justified the proclamation by verifying the promise. And we believe that the promise made to Joel, and realized in part upon the day of Pentecost, is for us and for our children, by all the immutable promises and goodness of Jesus Christ our Lord.

* * * * *

Indeed, we believe that in this preaching of conversion and sanctification, of the reality, in other words, and the witness, of the

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spiritual life, is involved the life-or-death struggle of Methodism. Liturgies, institutionalism, acquiescence in the new intellectual repugnance to the supernatural, worldly prosperity, worldly plans, can not save Methodism. We do not believe that the Blue Flower of Methodism, or that Methodism herself, can survive if we begin to hew out, no matter how beautiful, new cisterns disconnected from the Source, and go no longer to the Source in large numbers, if we begin to "evaporate religion in intellectual terms," as Professor William James has recently put it in referring to a work by a distinguished Methodist teacher, wherein "the ancient spirit of Methodism evaporates under those wonderfully able rationalistic booklets."

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It is a matter of indifference to us under what form those revivals may come which

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will bring sinners to a knowledge of God; and saints to a deeper knowledge of God. We expect—indeed, we hope for—changes in method, and we expect and certainly hope for changes in emphasis—as, for example, in stressing that wonderful opportunity now demonstrated by science, that childhood is the recruiting-time for Christ, and in an added emphasis on quiet personal evangelism. We expect that the religious awakening will take hold of a larger ethical feeling in relation to society. We expect all that the new psychologists expect. Let them come. Let new light break forth from the Word of God as relates to man and man, as well as to man and God. But we do not expect to see sin evaporated in an intellectual term; we do not expect—at least, we pray we may not see—new wells dug by Methodism which will abolish her historic use of the life-giving streams which have

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come down the mountain-side from the Source where the Blue Flower has been. We pray that Methodism will not go back on and forsake the path that leads to that Source, which is the atoning death of Christ.

We would not have the Methodist Church severe, intolerant, narrow, unprogressive, conceited, in any particular, in any man. But we would have her evermore thronging the path to the mercy-seat where Jesus is made known as a great, a complete personal Savior; and at that spot we would that often, most often, the voices of her people might be heard in prayer and praise. For then we know that God will not suffer her witness to be in vain; and we know that then she will find her Blue Flower of God's own peace; and we know that she will come back from that Source to work the works of God as his Son taught them to us on the mount, in the larger social consciousness

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and fraternity and righteousness which the
seers tell us are to characterize the next
great awakening.

* * * * *

But God forbid that Methodism should
forsake the Source—lest she lose her Blue
Flower.

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